

Russia Will Overshadow Trump's Presidency Unless He Takes Action

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Moscow's increasingly bold challenges to the West are heightening the risk for a Great Power conflict.

Presidents are rarely afforded the luxury of choosing their foreign-policy priorities. Instead, their international agendas are shaped by events -- George H. W. Bush's and Bill Clinton's by the collapse of the Soviet Union, George W. Bush's by the September 11 attacks, and Barack Obama's by the Arab uprisings and rise of the Islamic State. President Donald Trump faces the same challenge -- but this time it is Russia usurping the agenda.

But for all the attention on contacts between his presidential campaign and Moscow -- issues which call for a serious response from the White House, to be sure -- Trump's real Russia problem lies elsewhere: Moscow is increasingly bold in challenging the West, and the risk of great-power conflict is at its highest point since the end of the Cold War. The United States urgently needs a clear strategy for dealing with this challenge.

Trump's attitude toward Russia during the campaign was relatively benign. He resisted criticizing Russian President Vladimir Putin and expressed his openness toward better U.S.-Russia relations. Yet this approach largely reflected the view of the U.S. public: a Chicago Council [survey](#) in early 2016 found that 56 percent of Americans favored cooperating with Moscow over working to limit its influence, and Pew [reported](#) that only 23 percent identified Russia as an "adversary."

What a difference a year makes. In the wake of brazen Russian efforts to meddle in the U.S. presidential election (among others), 31 percent of Americans now [identify](#) Russia as the country representing the "greatest danger" to the United States. By contrast, only 22 percent name North Korea, and just 9 percent name Iran. While it is tempting to put this down to domestic politics -- and indeed, the shift is most pronounced among Democrats -- the trend is strongly bipartisan.

For Trump, this is an understandable conundrum -- not only because the political ground has shifted rapidly beneath his feet, but also because he was the winner of an election in which Moscow is accused of meddling, and thus perceives criticism of Russia as a proxy for an attack on the legitimacy of his victory.

To the administration's credit, however, its approach to Russia has not been a soft one: It has thus far maintained U.S. sanctions on Russia, gone ahead with U.S. deployments to Eastern Europe, and conducted strikes in Syria against Russian allies, in defiance of Moscow's bluster. Yet the Russian specter overshadows Trump's presidency, along with America's transatlantic alliances, and will continue to do so without firm action. Three steps are needed.

First, the Trump administration must arrive at a clear assessment of Russian motives, objectives, and strategy, to inform U.S. policymaking. Putin's Russia is a revisionist power, not content with the world as it is, but looking to reshape the international order to its own advantage. This means restoring Russian power to its previous heights, while exacting revenge along the way for slights real or imagined. It also means -- because Putin appears to harbor a zero-sum view of the world -- reducing the American role in the international order.

Yet for all of this ambition, Russia is frail economically and diplomatically, and thus must search for opportunities to seize and weaknesses to exploit -- for example, Western neglect of Syria or the decay and corruption of states like Ukraine.

Second, with this assessment settled, Trump must set a clear and firm direction for U.S. policy toward Russia. There is nothing wrong with engaging Moscow diplomatically, or even with looking for areas of cooperation. But the United States should do so with eyes open. The United States should know what it wants from engagement, and take care to build leverage beforehand. As with other adversaries, Russia's overarching strategy requires opposition to the United States for opposition's sake. Thus, whatever tactical convergences the two countries have, they will remain, at least for the time being, strategically at odds.

The U.S. strategy toward Russia should counter, not mirror, Moscow's strategy toward the United States. We need not focus on reducing Russian influence -- which is minimal in most regions -- for its own sake, nor should we adopt Putin's zero-sum mindset. Instead, we should deter Moscow by denying it any more easy opportunities for meddling, especially in Europe, and ensuring that its existing forays into Ukraine and Syria not only are

unrewarded, but incur a steep strategic cost.

It will be harder, but is just as urgent, to deter Russia in cyberspace, to prevent a repetition of its meddling in the U.S. election. A firm position on this last question is particularly important for Trump. He may fear that it will become a weapon against him, but in fact ordering a review of Russian interference and strengthening American defenses against such attempts at subversion would be a sign of strength and confidence.

Finally, the United States should rally allies to support U.S. policy toward Russia. During his May trip to Brussels, Trump called on allies to honor their defense spending commitments as NATO members -- an entirely reasonable demand also conveyed by his predecessors. Yet our partners would be justified in responding, "To what purpose?" NATO's original mission was to deter and defend against the Soviet Union, a purpose that faded after the USSR's collapse.

Some, including Trump, have suggested that NATO shift its focus to issues such as terrorism and migration. However, while those matters are urgent, they call for a different set of capabilities, and perhaps partners, than great-power deterrence does. If Washington wishes to reenergize the alliance and motivate allies to ramp up defense spending, it should make clear the U.S. commitment to deterrence -- a mission that once again is highly relevant. If instead we signal ambivalence, we should expect allies in turn to hedge their bets with Moscow or focus on EU-centric defense partnerships.

For any administration, dealing with Russia and other emboldened, great-power adversaries would be a tough problem. For the Trump administration, getting ahead of this challenge is particularly important if it hopes to regain control of its foreign policy agenda.

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